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SUBJECT: Religious Freedom: CRA Chairman Discusses Recent Progress

Ref: Hanoi 2399

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: During an October 5 meeting with the Charge, Committee on Religious Affairs Chairman Ngo Yen Thi described GVN efforts to accelerate registrations of Protestant congregations in the North. The late September conference for northern local officials was described as a success: officials from provinces with "pilot registrations" pledged to accelerate registrations, and provinces without pilot registrations are initiating the pilot phase this month. Thi expects the number of registered churches in the north to rise quickly in the near future and promised to provide more details on projections in one week's time. Thi said the CRA is using radio broadcasts in the north to get the word out on the registration process; expressed the CRA's willingness to cooperate with and assist the ECVN to build its capacity to travel to and work in the north; and outlined recent progress in southern Vietnam and the Central Highlands. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Charge met October 5 with GVN Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Chairman Ngo Yen Thi to press for quicker progress in the area of religious freedom. The Charge opened by noting the intense interest in the USG and Congress in this matter, particularly as little time remains before U.S. International Religious Freedom Ambassador-at-Large John Hanford has to make his recommendation on Vietnam's status as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). Although there is recognition of the progress made to date in Vietnam, as reflected in the International Religious Freedom Report, there are also significant concerns.

¶3. (SBU) In particular, more churches and congregations in the north need to be registered, and, as Ambassador Hanford described during his August visit, registrations for 100 churches and congregations is an appropriate and reachable target, the Charge continued. In addition to receiving an update on registrations in the north, the Charge also sought from Chairman Thi a readout of the CRA-organized late-September meeting with northern provincial officials.

Northern Registrations

¶4. (SBU) Chairman Thi responded that the conference for northern officials was held in Hanoi on September 28. Its purpose was to evaluate the pilot church/congregation registration program and allow officials from provinces in which the pilot registration program had begun to share their experiences with officials from those provinces that had not yet had any pilot registrations. To date, 20 churches/congregations have registered under the pilot registration program (two more than the CRA had previously reported). As a result of the conference, the provinces that have participated in the pilot program -- Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Yen Bai, Bac Kan and Thai Nguyen -- pledged to immediately accelerate the

registration of churches/congregations through the end of the year. Furthermore, thanks to the conference, those provinces that have not yet had pilot registrations -- Thanh Hoa, Tuyen Quang, Cao Bang and Dien Bien -- would undertake a number of registrations in October. To assist these provinces, the CRA will send officials to work with local authorities. "By the end of the year, we hope to have more than just 10's of registered churches and congregations," Thi said.

¶15. (SBU) Pressed by the Charge for an estimated number of registrations, as well as a timetable for them, Chairman Thi consulted a spreadsheet and said that Thanh Hoa plans to have two pilot registrations (in the next 10 days), Tuyen Quang will register three, Cao Bang will register three and Dien Bien will register two.

Regarding those provinces with existing pilot registration programs, Thi said the numbers would be higher, but are harder to estimate. He pledged to provide us with further information in one week's time. However, "there should be a rapid number of new registrations, as Deputy Prime Minister Truong Vinh Trong exhorted the participants in the September conference to do so," Thi said.

GVN Using Radio, Other Media to Get the Word Out

¶16. (SBU) In response to the Charge's question about how the GVN and the CRA are getting the message out about the registration process in the north, Chairman Thi said that the CRA primarily uses local radio broadcasts. Where feasible, it also uses newspapers and television broadcasts, he said.

Relations with ECVN

¶17. (SBU) The Charge asked how the CRA's relationship with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam - North (ECVN) has evolved as these pilot registrations progress, and whether the CRA and ECVN are now working more closely and collaboratively together. Chairman Thi responded that the CRA always engages with the relevant religious

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organization, whether the ECVN in the north or the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in the south and Central Highlands. Between the two, Thi admitted that relations with the SECV are much closer and that the CRA has had more success in facilitating the group's work in the Central Highlands. The ECVN, because of "internal problems" and a "shortage of human resources," does not often send its pastors to northern provinces, so their work has been slower than that of the SECV (reftel). For example, although the ECVN provided a list of 150 "mature" congregations, it has not yet been able to travel to all of them. However, when the ECVN does travel to the provinces, the CRA does everything it can to facilitate meetings with local officials. Thi then volunteered that the CRA understands that the ECVN must become stronger, and the CRA will provide technical and other assistance to the ECVN to "improve the organization's capacity to travel to and work in the north."

National Regulations on Registering

¶18. (SBU) On the subject of national regulations that guide registrations, Chairman Thi said that the implementing decree of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief is the basic regulation.

Developments in Southern, Central Vietnam

¶19. (SBU) Repeating some previously reported information, Chairman Thi said that there have been many positive developments elsewhere in Vietnam. For example, in the Central Highlands, 73 congregations have been recognized and 718 places of worship have been registered.

On September 26, Dak Lak Province had eight new pastors ordained (in Phuc An Commune in Krong Pa District). The province also began a second theological training course for 40 individuals, Thi said. Authorities in the south recently issued religious activities certificates to three religious groups (the United World Church, the Association of Meditative Buddhist Home Followers and the Four Gratuities) and allowed the Baptists and Mennonites to register, he

continued. Other groups, such as the 7th Day Adventists, Pentecostal Church and Baha'i, will also be registered soon. As for central Vietnam, the recent typhoon has delayed the registration of churches and congregations, but there should be good news in October and November, Thi pledged.

¶10. (SBU) In closing, Thi noted that the CRA is now working on regulations to guide the religious activities of foreigners who come to Vietnam to do business or reside, "but who practice a religion that does not exist here." He implied that the new regulations will permit worshippers of religions "not yet recognized" by the GVN to be able to apply for permission to hold services. The Charge concluded by promising that the Mission will meet with Chairman Thi in one week to learn more about upcoming registrations in the north and other progress that the CRA will hopefully have to report.

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